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**A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CHINESE AND AMERICAN CINEMATIC
DEPICTIONS OF THE FEMALE ADOLESCENT LIFE TRANSITION**

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Honors Council

For Honors in Education

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Abstract

The thesis examines the representation through film of the ways social systems in Western and Eastern societies impact female adolescents' growth. My study focuses on the transition from childhood to adolescence, from a relatively "naive" state to a reflective state of mind, filled with uncertainty about oneself and the future. In this process, there are emotions of confusion, insecurity, struggle, anxiety, and intergenerational conflicts. Some crucial factors such as friendships, family relationships, and societal pressures are influential in adolescents' formation of their personalities. This transformational process is universal across all cultures, as every adolescent experiences the transition from youth to adulthood. However, different cultures have different educational concepts and place different expectations on adolescents, bearing upon the individual's experience of this transition. This study consists of a comparative analysis of four films, focusing on the differences in views on education, teen psychology, and child-rearing practices in China and the United States.

Introduction

The project contextualizes the four films in the literature on female youth development in social context, as well as film analysis. It is essential to use films because girls nowadays grow up in a media-rich environment filled with images that reinforce cultural norms of femininity. As Steinke (2005) points out, before girls reach adolescence, the time when most begin to develop individual identities and prepare for future roles, they are likely to have seen countless media images of women that emphasize feminine qualities and urge conformity to traditional stereotypes. The amount of time adolescents spend using the media each day and their increasing dependency on the media for information during the adolescent years clearly underscores the importance of the media as pervasive and influential socializing agents in the lives of many adolescents. Therefore, the media largely affects the growth of young people. Furthermore, suicide is a major and serious public health problem worldwide. As Cheng et al. (2020) pointed out, “nearly 800,000 people commit suicide each year, that is the second leading cause of death among people aged 15–34 years old globally, and accounts for 19% of all deaths” (p. 1). It is essential to understand the difficulties adolescents face to help them be brave and get along with the beautiful but sometimes challenging societies. By looking at films, I get a better sense of how a society portrays a girl’s come of age, and how the portrayal in return influences the growth of adolescent girls. In this study, I delve into the psychological growth of teenage girls from China and the United States through studying films.

The process of maturing is a natural conflict familiar to everyone by their teenage years, just like all dramas thrive on conflict. Shary, (2002) pointed out that "understanding how we learn and grow in our youth is integral to understanding who we become as adults." Therefore, it is significant to study cinematic portrayals of the female adolescent life transition in China and

the United States in current circumstances, social environments, modern technology, and pop culture.

The four films examined in this thesis are *My Best Summer* (2019), *Better Days* (2019), *Eighth Grade* (2018), *Lady Bird* (2017). These films are very representative of modern youth films, having earned awards and even Oscar nominations. *My Best Summer* (2019) won the Golden Crane Award for the Most Popular Film at the 2018 Tokyo International Film Festival; the leading actor of the film, Chen Feiyu, won the Outstanding Newcomer Award 11th Macau International Film Festival. *Better Days* (2019) was ranked in eight awards at the 39th Hong Kong Film Awards and earned Oscar nomination for Best International Feature Film. *Lady Bird* (2017) received 41 major nominations in 2018, winning 13 awards, including best screenplay, best picture, best performance, and best motion picture. *Eighth Grade* (2018) entered into competition for the Grand Jury Prize at the 2018 Sundance Film Festival and had a leading number of nominations at the Independent Spirit Awards with four, including Best Film. The awards suggest the ways in which these films capture a certain social pulse, strike an important chord in our collective imaginations and thus become representative of central themes of our development and that is why you chose them. I chose these films because they are very representative of the subject matter. They truly reflect the influence of society, family, and school on young people's psychological growth in the United States and China.

There are several recurring themes among the analysis of these four films. The themes capture 1) the tensions between conformity and individualism, 2) belonging and outcasting, 3) family inclusion and separation, and 4) reality and fantasy/expectations. As they repeatedly occur throughout the media portrayal of girls' growing-up journey, I recognize them as maturation elements. As young people grow up, they often like to compare themselves with

those around them to gain a sense of identity and belonging. In the chapters, I investigate Chinese girls' social expectations and how social media influences American adolescents' psychological growth to explore the tension between conformity and individuality that manifests itself in a conservative culture and a more liberal one. The idea of belonging and outcasting is essential, especially in the case of bullying. I explore the psychology of the bully and the victims and peer relationship and social acceptance to create a clear picture of what "belonging and outcasting" bring to adolescents' growth. Leaving the parental discipline and becoming independent is an important step that cannot be ignored in the growth process, and it is also the first step for young people to reach adulthood. In the following chapters, I discuss parenting styles in adolescents' development in Chinese and American social contexts to investigate how adolescents from different cultures deal with family separation. The "most cruel" step in youth growth is to recognize reality. Adolescents always have a lot of beautiful imaginations about the unknown future. However, as young people mature, they often find that adulthood is not an idealized destination but the beginning of a new life stage. When imagination and reality do not match, the inevitable sense of loss can make teenagers feel self-doubt and pressure. Therefore, I explore the tension between fantasy and reality by investigating the transitions from high school to university and concepts of self-concept, as well as how teenagers deal with stress.

The film *My Best Summer* (2019) shows how Chinese girls try to establish self-confidence and chase their dreams under the social condition of collectivism, which blindly pursues unification, eliminating Chinese students' unique personalities. *Eighth Grade* (2018) addresses how social media unifies aesthetic standards, defines girls, and establishes a model of "what a girl should/ideal look like". The American girl in the movie strives to find herself, not to

be influenced by this mainstream or popular culture, and to build self-confidence instead of vanity.

Sometimes, being an outcast means that one is brave; sometimes, being an outcast will put oneself in a dangerous situation. The film *Better Days* (2019) puts forward the concept of bullying, which can be read as a fight between "belonging" and "outcasting." Isolated and bullied people are unprotected, while most people choose to be bystanders, "conforming" to the cruel phenomenon to be safe. The films *Lady Bird* (2017) and *Eighth Grade* (2018) also touch upon the idea of belonging and outcasting: the heroines hide their personality and create a lot of commonality with popular girls to cater to them and become friends with them; later, they realize that recognizing herself, even if they are outcasts, is the first step in being themselves and reconcile with themselves.

All of the four films discuss the conflicts between family belonging and separation. In *Eighth Grade* (2018), the single father works hard to get his daughter out of the addictive social media world. He accompanies his daughter with love and patience, fostering her sense of belongingness. In *Lady Bird* (2017), all Lady Bird wants is to get away from her family as far as possible when she goes to college, and she applies for the schools on the opposite coast from where she lives, "fighting for" her separation. *My Best Summer* (2019) talks about the idea of how a Chinese girl who is entirely dependent on her family deals with separation after she graduates from high school.

Last but not least, the tension between reality and fantasy occurs throughout the growth of young people. The concept can also be understood as hope versus failure: on the path of adolescence's development, many things often happen differently from what they expected, and "adulthoods" are not as beautiful and free as they imagined. Since things don't always go as

planned, it is essential to discuss the fantasy among adolescents and the appropriate ways to help them get a clearer sense of reality as they grow. In *Lady Bird* (2017), Lady Bird goes to New York as she plans, but the life there is nothing like she expects. In *Eighth Grade* (2018), Kayla imagines herself being "the coolest girl in the world" when she graduates from high school, but nothing changes, and she is still the socially awkward girl. In *My Best Summer* (2019), the high schoolers imagine their future to be well-connected and their friendships to last forever, but in reality, the classmates who were close as a family all went their separate ways and lost contact. In *Better Days* (2019), Chen Nian has always thought that after the college entrance examination is a brand new life waiting for her, she has not seen the hopeful future that she has always envisioned. In everyone's adolescence, an expectation is not fulfilled, and disappointment in the coming-of-age-process is inevitable.

The thesis is divided into four chapters, each focusing on one of the films. In Chapter 1, I analyze the film *My Best Summer* (2019), directed by Zhang. I explore the movie's description of youth and analyze the children's mental journey growing up in the Chinese education system. Specifically, I delve into the topics of expectations from society, pressure from parents and teachers, and collectivism in the Chinese education system and discuss how these factors influence the psychological growth of female adolescents in China.

Chapter 2 focuses on the film *Better Days* (2019) by Derek Tsang. The chapter includes the following topics: bullying situation in Chinese Schools, school's role in bullying, family environment and bullying, and the transition from high school to university in the Chinese cultural context. I analyze the reasons behind bullying among Chinese teenagers and suggest ways to prevent it.

Chapter 3 centers around the film *Eighth Grade* (2018) by Burnham. The film records the process of an American girl who continues to find self-worth and build self-confidence. Most girls have experienced the lack of self-confidence, self-doubt, and the psychological growth stage that Kayla has experienced in real life. This chapter explores the two factors most likely to affect young girls: friendship and social media. I analyze how these two factors affect young people's psychological growth and put forward suggestions on how to protect them better and let them build self-confidence and positive values.

Chapter 4 is based on the film *Lady Bird* (2017), directed by Gerwig. I chose this movie because it truly represents the mental journey in a rebellious adolescence period: pursuing love and dreams, longing for independence, conflicts, and reconciliation with their parents. I analyze American teenagers' psychological growth and the way they get along with their parents. I also discuss how parents should communicate effectively with adolescents in their "rebellious period" and discipline their adolescents while not forgetting to make them feel loved.

Chapter 1: *My Best Summer*

“Choose what is truly valuable, don't regret it because of your willfulness, and don't miss the people you care about because you think you don't deserve it. ” - My Best Summer



Figure 1.0: Geng Geng and Yu Huai (Zhang, *My Best Summer* 2019)

My Best Summer (2019) directed by Zhang is a teen drama about the growth of Chinese teenagers during the three years of high school from the perspective of a girl named Geng Geng. This chapter focuses on the movie's description of youth and analyzes the children's mental journey growing up in the Chinese education system. Specifically, I use the storylines and scenes captured in *My Best Summer* (2019), combined with research and existing literature, to elaborate on the psychological growth of Chinese youth from four perspectives: Chinese higher education structure, the role of teachers in adolescent's development, parenting styles in adolescents' story, and social expectations for girls and its impact. I also pay attention to society's portrayal of girls and the hopes it places on girls and explains these voices' impact on Chinese female adolescents.

The movie takes a look back to high school times, seven years. This is key for the mood in the film: melancholia, missing the high school times. It shapes the flashback's atmosphere. The film divides into two parts: the Chinese youth's high school years and their lives after

entering society seven years later. In the adolescent part, the director deliberately used large apertures as a shooting technique, backlighting, and various bright tones to highlight high school time's preciousness. In the modern scene parts, the color tone is much colder, intended to reflect the adult world's reality and complexity. This film's plot is simple and closely related to reality, vividly depicting a typical Chinese educational environment narratively.

The "youth part" of the film began in Wuhan, China, in 2008. This year was a significant year for China: Beijing hosted the Olympic Games, and China successfully launched Shenzhou VII; this year was also a critical year for the heroine of the story, Geng Geng: she is admitted to the best high school in Wuhan, Zhenhua High School. This all adds up to the beauty of Geng Geng's memories. The film uses a comic collage to remember all these exciting events. The time when she grew up, first love, best friends, was wonderful in her recollection. The film style stresses this clearly with music, slow motion, soft colors. The director used a large aperture to make the whole picture look gentle and beautiful, like a dream.

Entering a competitive school brings honor and a bright future and peer pressures, as well as high expectations from parents and teachers. Like most adolescents, Geng Geng meets her favorite male friend named Yu Huai at her school. Yu Huai's grades are excellent, while Geng Geng ranks almost at the bottom of her class. The difference in academic performance makes Geng Geng feel inferior and dare not express her feelings. In the third year of high school in China, students need to choose one of the "Liberal Arts" or "Science" tracks and then take different subjects during the college entrance examination. Although Geng Geng is better at liberal arts, to stay close to Yu Huai, she resolutely chose subjects she was not good at, science. She studies hard every day to "match" Yu Huai's excellence, but in the end, she still does not dare to express her love for him due to all kinds of pressure from school, society, and family. In all,

My Best Summer (2019) tells how Geng Geng coped with puberty, academic stress, and social expectations on her during the three years of high school. This movie's characters and plot settings are very realistic, presenting the struggle and worthwhile psychological growth that most Chinese youth would comply with.

Chinese Higher Education Structure

A school is a place where adolescents spend most of their time. They are introduced to new ideas and activities, encounter different people, and form their worldview through interaction with teachers and peers. A book review about schools' influence on identity formation by Lisa S. Garbrecht (2006) suggests that when figuring out who they are in modern times, girls are navigating the liminal spaces to figure out the appropriate levels of masculinity and femininity according to the changing norms. Moreover, girls are expected to adapt to new expectations and circumstances, by being more flexible and working harder. As most of students' identity development is occurring in school settings, it is an important context where schools can support adolescents' identity development. A typical Chinese high school class usually has forty to fifty students taught by the same teachers and share the same classrooms for three years during their high school journey. Compared to some western countries, where teachers teach multiple subjects to their students at the primary and secondary school levels, in China, teachers generally teach only their specialist subjects.

Each class has a "headteacher" responsible for the safety and mental health of about 50 students in this class during the three years of high school. When the students entered the school, they were assigned to different classrooms and got to know the students with whom they would spend the upcoming three years together. The setting of typical Chinese schools makes the headteacher play a supervisor's role, "taking charge of" fifty young people. As leaders, they do

not have the same status as the students but are superior, so they have a lot of respect for them. Chinese education system places teachers above students for several reasons: first of all, the traditional Confucian philosophy regards teachers as masters, which is a well-respected profession placed at the top of society; secondly, fifty adolescents gathered in one class is challenging to control. It is necessary to emphasize the teacher's dominant position at the moment the pupils step into the classroom; otherwise, it is difficult for young people who are experiencing rebelliousness to obey the teacher's instructions, not to disrupt classroom discipline, and to study attentively.



Figure 1.1: Students clapping after teacher Zhang's self introduction (*Zhang, My Best Summer 2019*)

In the film, Mr. Zhang is Geng Geng and Yu Huai's class's headteacher. When he briefly introduced himself by saying, "Hello everyone, I am Teacher Zhang", the students applauded, which shows teachers' high status in students' hearts. The power imbalance embodied in the unequal proportion of teacher-student classroom discourse lingers on in Chinese university classrooms.

The three years of high school are crucial to the formation of adolescents' worldview. The most remarkable thing is that collectivism is deeply imprinted in every student's heart when they

enter the school. There is a blackboard drawn by the students with chalk every week at the back of each classroom. It represents the students' efforts in a class working collectively towards a common goal and inspires a class to move forward as a group. In *My Best Summer* (2019), the drawing on the blackboard is updated based on China's actual situation at the time. The pictures in the film are centered around “Gaokao,” the Chinese national college entrance exam. The students working towards the same goal represent collectivism in Chinese high schools.

Chinese educational system values discipline more than one's desire to show their unique brilliance. In other words, class honor value more than personal achievement. Teachers also pay more attention to leading the entire class to progress and seldom care about personal growth and difficulties. Wang Peng et al. (2009) investigate Chinese high school teachers' work stress and find that Chinese high school teachers have functioned within an examination-oriented education system mode for a long time, and endure huge stress helping their students qualify for a higher school. This stress will do harm to the teachers' psychological health and in turn may do harm to their students. In *My Best Summer* (2019), the teacher judges the class based on the average score of the class in a grade rather than focusing on individual students' progress and regression. Although the teachers did not deliberately make the students think that the individual is not essential, the entire Chinese education system's collectivism and the competitive relationship between classes have subtly caused Chinese students to lose or downplay their individuality.



Figure 1.2: Student criticized for dyeing hair (Zhang, *My Best Summer* 2019)

The existing studies suggest that schools and teachers are often unaware of the many different ways they may significantly impact adolescents' identity development. Schools and teachers unintentionally convey the messages to adolescents concerning who they should or can be through differentiation and selection, teaching strategies, teacher expectations, and peer norms, impacting adolescents' identity.

Due to the influence of collectivism, students pursue "conformity" more than they seek "diversity". In *My Best Summer* (2019), a girl dyed her hair and was called out by the teacher and scolded. Chinese-style education prefers obedient girls to girls with a unique personality. Geng Geng has a typical image of a good girl: with short hair, no makeup, and unassuming character. But it was her personality that caused her to miss many opportunities to express herself. A drawback of Chinese-style education is the elimination of individuality. Chinese students must wear school uniforms throughout the year, which reflects the emphasis on unity and loss of individuality. This loss of identity is not only reflected in appearance, but also in personality and thoughts. The literature mentions a phenomenon that, regardless of the differences in Chinese college students' majors and stages at college, they tend to show an obstinate pattern of not

responding to the teacher's questions addressed to the whole class and shunning questions directed toward individuals. Yu (2016) explains that speaking up in class is considered an external exhibition of self-construal, a kind of subjective cultural-semiotic practice. When students put forward their own ideas, there is a chance that they will be different from expectation, which makes them feel insecure. Therefore, an internal force keeps most students in conformity with their not-so-responsive group and hinders the expression of their individuality and in-class dialogism. It is not conducive to students' identity and psychological development, inhibiting critical thinking and real academic innovation. In the film, Gengeng, hesitant to raise her hand and ask questions, shows her fear of “unconformity.” She is afraid that she is the only one who has the question, and it’s her own responsibility to figure it out, rather than wasting everyone else’s time.

Role of Teachers in Adolescents’ Development

The teachers portrayed in *My Best Summer* (2019) are diverse. There are two representative types of teachers shown in the film: the headteacher Mr. Zhang, the caring type; and the Chinese teacher, representing the harsh and cold type.

Their relationship with students and their influence on students are different; what stays the same is that they all love students very much and hope that they can have a bright future. In many Chinese schools, the teacher's role is compared to that of a gardener, whereas students are regarded as budding flowers in need of caring and shaping, and trimming.



Figure 1.3: Class Teacher Mr. Zhang (Zhang, *My Best Summer* 2019)



Figure 1.4: Chinese Teacher scolding Yu Huai (Zhang, *My Best Summer* 2019)

There is a traditional Chinese saying that "strictness is love, and forgiveness is harm." Many parents and teachers express their love and care for their students in a very stingy way, often described as "knife-like mouth and tofu-like heart." They often behave harshly in words and even physically, but they still love the students very much in their hearts. In the *My Best Summer* (2019), the Chinese teacher asks Yu Huai to get out of the classroom in front of the class because he falls asleep during class. Although this approach is not considered humane in Western concepts, Chinese children can withstand verbal and even physical punishment. From the

perspective of individualism and collectivism, specific parenting behaviors are interpreted differently based on different cultural values. Indeed, adolescents in collectivist cultures are likely to perceive shaming practices as desirable for hierarchical order and harmony. Therefore, shaming may have constructive socialization effects in Chinese cultural contexts. As Chinese adolescents grow up in this philosophy, they understand that harshness and criticism are spurs and encouragement. Yin (2016) suggested that teachers viewed emotion regulation as an essential skill. By nature, teaching is a type of human interaction between teachers and students, which requires much emotional management from teachers. The competence of emotion regulation is one of the criteria for a "good teacher." Chinese students have a relatively high tolerance for criticism; some Chinese teachers will act very harshly, criticize, and even punish students in seemingly hard ways. They conceal their soft side to stimulate the students' maximum potential.

Parenting Styles in Adolescents' Development

Yu Huai's mother has a typical Chinese mother's characteristics: protective, strict, and sometimes disregarding his son's feelings and unreasonableness. In *My Best Summer* (2019), when she learned that Yu Huai's deskmate was Geng Geng, who ranks at the bottom of the class, she ran to the school to ask the headteacher to change his seat. The reason is simply that Geng Geng's grades are not as good as Yu Huai's academic performance. Yu Huai's mother is afraid that Yu Huai's grades will be negatively affected. Liu (2016) have investigated whether parental control would predict adolescent obedience to parental authority and found that behavioral control from fathers and mothers positively and significantly predicted adolescent obedience, and psychological control from mothers negatively and significantly predicted obedience. Their

study shows that adolescents increase their parental authority compliance when parents provide behavioral supervision and regulation.



Figure 1.5: Yu Huai's mother asking for a favor (Zhang, *My Best Summer* 2019)

Yu Huai's mother may seem extreme when handling things, but it is ubiquitous in the Chinese education system. Parents spare no effort to remove the thorns in their children's learning path because performance is the most critical measurement factor for Chinese children. Many Chinese parents would rather sell their houses and buy school district houses far away from where they work, in order to allow their children to go to a better school. After high school, students face “Gaokao”, the Chinese National College Entrance Exam. The exam results determine which university they can enter in the future. Therefore, during the three years of high school, parents and teachers will keep an eye on the ups and downs of students' grades at all times. From the moment the teenagers step into the school, their performance competition begins. Every school has monthly exams, and there are exams at the end of each semester. After the exams, there is a parent-teacher meeting. In *My Best Summer* (2019), Geng Geng describes the parent-teacher meeting as "the jaws of death." The discussion at parent meetings is often not

the children's growth but the progress and regression of their test scores and how they will strive to improve their future scores. Schools, teachers, and parents all value performance more than focusing on young people's overall development.

Too much focus on grades has caused the Chinese youth to deviate in their self-evaluation, which deepens their lack of character development and hobbies. Geng Geng, who has low grades, lacks self-confidence and firmly believes that only with good grades can she be worthy of Yu Huai. When performance becomes a single measure, teenagers will naturally think that all qualities not related to account are useless. They no longer spend time on their hobbies, because this is considered a waste of time. Because Chinese adolescents have less contact with the world, they cannot find what they are passionate about, but they need to decide on the major or enter society and start working.

In terms of personality, they lack independence, and it isn't easy to make their own choices. Chen, Yuan, Yang & Lai (2020) found that the psychological autonomy children receive from parenting contributes to their development of self-adequacy through parenting's association with a healthier self-concept. In contrast, coercive control from parents makes adolescents have a negative self-concept. Besides, adolescents' positive self-evaluations can contribute to social competence and their ability to establish close relationships. Adolescents with positive self-concepts are more open to others and can share thoughts and feelings, so they are more likely to develop close friendships. In the film, Yu Huai's mother even intervened with whom her son would be friends. The maternal control causes Yu Huai's lack of self-awareness and creates obstacles in establishing romantic relationships. Romantic relationships and friendships have similar characteristics, including mutuality, intimacy, and self-disclosure, so self-concept may also mediate the relationship between parenting and adolescents' romantic relationships. In *My*

Best Summer (2019), Yu Huai couldn't express his love for Geng Geng in the right way, causing them to miss a beautiful relationship. Fathers' demandingness did not show any association with adolescents' self-concept. Chen et al. (2020) suggest that Chinese fathers were perceived to be less responsive and less demanding among their adolescent children compared with Chinese mothers. Chinese adolescents reported that their fathers displayed less concern for them and engaged in less communication with them. Chinese fathers are encouraged to be solemn and sober and refrain from expressing their emotions.

Although parental over-control may cause children's lack of self-cognition and emotional expression barriers, it does not affect their emotional cognition and regulation. Gao, Bullock & Liu (2021) found that maternal guilt induction does not indicate maternal maladaptive emotions and negative cognitions in interdependence-oriented cultures. Such inductive practices intend to regulate children's behaviors more acceptable from the child's perspective. Their studies revealed that Chinese adolescents' emotion regulation is impaired by their mothers' guilt induction and shaming. Surprisingly, the mother's love withdrawal was also not harmful to adolescents' emotional regulation. Therefore, parents' use of guilt induction and shame is less detrimental to children from collectivist backgrounds. Furthermore, parental guilt induction and shaming may not be predictive of later Chinese adolescents' emotion regulation.

Social Expectations for Chinese Girls and their Impact

It is widely recognized that child socialization based on gender-stereotypes plays a significant role in perpetuating gender inequalities in society. Traditional gender stereotypes have proved to be especially harmful to girls and women because they are often only employed for female subjugation. Liu (2006) collected data through semi-structured interviews with 20 families in north China and explored parental gender-specific expectations of their

only-children. Their study reveals patterns of differences in parental expectations based on gender, and to a lesser degree, class. With the stereotypes in mind, the parents indicated that some subjects and occupations suit girls while others suit boys. In *My Best Summer* (2019), When Geng Geng was considering what career he would do in the future, Geng Geng's parents suggested that science is too hard for a girl, also it won't be easy to find a job. She indicated that it ought to be something steady and peaceful, decent and clean, and not very challenging and risky in terms of occupation for a girl. The most important thing for a girl is to be steady and safe, such as becoming a teacher. Social expectations limit Chinese girls' choices, and they dare not try a career that does not "belong" to them. Most Chinese girls are well-behaved in terms of character because traditional Chinese thinking expects women to be obedient and not rebellious.



Figure 1.6: Geng Geng hesitates to raise her hand in class (Zhang, *My Best Summer* 2019)

Boys are encouraged to explore, while girls are limited to stability. Not only in choosing jobs but also in relationships, most Chinese girls are also disadvantaged. In the film, Geng Geng abandoned her "liberal arts" track to maintain her relationship with Yu Huai. In her own words, "It's all worth it when I see him smile" (*My Best Summer*, 2019).

Geng Geng has the characteristics expected and commonly found among many Chinese young girls: introvert, low self-esteem, and quiet. In *My Best Summer* (2019), she does not dare to raise her hand in class because she was too shy and didn't want to be too pushy. Nervous behavior was not perceived as problematic and perhaps even regarded as beneficial to the individual because Chinese parents and teachers likely viewed it as consistent with traditional collectivistic Chinese values for modesty, self-restraint, and cautiousness. Shy youth in the Chinese cultural context excelled because they received praise and positive support from parents, teachers, and peers. However, more recent studies reveal significant psychosocial risks associated with shyness in China, particularly in Beijing and Shanghai's urban areas. Liu et al. (2019) argued that Chinese shy young adolescents who encounter peer difficulties are more likely to internalize the negative social feedback, which in turn fosters strong feelings of loneliness, social inadequacy and depressive symptoms.

Shyness causes potential harm to teenagers in personality and makes them miss many opportunities in their lives. Compared to Western individuals, Chinese individuals hold more traditional and conservative views about adolescent romance's appropriateness. Adolescent romantic relationships are considered subordinate to the strong family bond emphasized in Confucian cultures. During adolescence, romance is taboo prohibited in schools because people believe it hinders academic achievement. Due to the pressure from society and her shy personality, Geng Geng sacrificed a lot for Yu Huai, but in the end, she did not get the relationship she waited for so long.

Conclusion

My Best Summer (2019) film vividly depicts the world Chinese adolescents face. Expectations from society, pressure from parents and teachers, and collectivism in the Chinese education system have all affected young people's psychology and decision-making. Since we cannot change China's education system, the college entrance examination is inevitable. However, we can change teachers' and parents' attitudes and educate their children to support their growth better. Verhoeven et al. (2019) studied how schools and teachers can support adolescents' identity development and indicated that teachers could organize different types of explorative learning experiences to support adolescents' identity development: affairs aimed at in-breadth exploring new identity positions, further specifying already existing self-understandings and reflecting on self-understandings (Verhoeven et al., 2019).

Meaningful learning experiences make it easier for adolescents to link their already present self-understandings to school's learning contents and activities. The practice may help them identify with the learning content and activities, stimulating them to further explore whether they want to make specific identity commitments for those contents and activities. Learning experiences are considered meaningful when adolescents recognize themselves in the learning material and content. Meaningful learning experiences do not have to concern adventures that perfectly suit adolescents. Instead, they are experiences that appeal to adolescents in such a way that they feel motivated to engage in identity exploration.

It is vital to make adolescents feel respected and appreciated to warrant a supportive classroom climate. A supportive social atmosphere may help adolescents to feel safe enough to take these risks and deal with such possible discomfort. To be more specific, teacher compliments and warm teacher-student relationships may contribute to a supportive classroom

climate. Teachers should also communicate to their students that they can make mistakes. When teachers share their doubts and make mistakes every once in a while, this may reassure students.

Chinese parents' strict control seems unreasonable, but from the filter of Chinese traditional culture, it is an expression of love. It does not detriment Chinese children's mental health but makes them more dependent and lacks self-cognition and critical thinking skills. Camras, Sun, Fraumeni and Li (2017) examined how mainland Chinese and the U.S. American children's interpretations of their parents' coercive authority and assertion, and found that critical comparison and shaming moderate relations between Chinese parents and help their children to adjust to the very competitive and stressful campus environment. Therefore, when adolescents interpret their parents' behavior more positively, they may mitigate adverse effects of coercive authority assertion and critical comparison and shaming. Moreover, Chinese students tend to convert stress into motivation, motivating them to adjust their mindset and study more attentively.

Liu and Chang (2016) found that mothers' psychological control displayed a negative relation with obedience. As indicated previously, mothers are the primary caregivers in a family in Chinese culture; mothers are typically in charge of family tasks. Their responsibilities include caring for and disciplining children. Mothers are generally more involved in the socialization process and have greater parenting demands than fathers. This finding suggests that although a child may have a difficult temperament, positive discipline from a mother can promote his or her intentional self-regulation, which indicates that adolescents can benefit from positive parental discipline in terms of their development of social competence.

Chapter 2: *Better Days*

“There has never been a lesson that taught us how to become adults. We live in the gutter, but some people still look up at the stars. ” - Better Days



Figure 2.0: Chen Nian and Xiao Bei (Tsang, *Better Days* 2019)

Better Days (2019) by Derek Tsang is about bullying in Chinese high schools. Globally, bullying is a typical unfortunate situation young people might encounter as they grow up. In recent years, people have paid more and more attention to the mental health and overall development of young people. They have begun to explore the phenomenon of bullying in high school, because this phenomenon deeply affects the mental and physical health of young people. This chapter analyzes the reasons behind bullying among Chinese teenagers, as well as ways to prevent it. The chapter includes the following topics: bullying situation in China, school's role in bullying, family environment and bullying, and the transition from high school to university in Chinese cultural context.

The film *Better Days* (2019) is very realistic and cruel, speaking up for the bullied Chinese high school students. The protagonist of the story is Chen Nian, who comes from a

single-parent family with poor economic conditions. Although her family is not a perfect one, Chen Nian has always been kind and hopeful for the future. She hopes to study hard and go to a university in Beijing so that she can work hard to create a better life for her mother.

Unfortunately, Chen Nian, became the target of bullying in her high school. The high school she attends is a "repetition school." The young people who failed the first college entrance examination would gather together, prepare for a whole year, and then retake the college entrance examination. This kind of school is very stressful because everyone wants to seize their second chance, try their best to get into a good university, and change their destiny. Every student's desks are full of books, separating them from the outside world. They also plug in their headphones to block out the noise from their surroundings. No matter what happens around them, it is not as important as learning knowledge and getting good grades. There is almost no communication among students in such a class, and everyone is indifferent and friendship seems to be a waste of time and energy. This kind of school is actually a real type of school and not just how it is depicted in the film.

The depressive environment creates ruthless competition and pressure, leaving no room for mutual care and encouragement. One day, a girl named Hu Xiaodie committed suicide by jumping off the building. Nobody in the class has witnessed the tragic event but everyone gathers to see the dead girl lying in the school courtyard. Director Tsang never shows us the body. The viewer only gets brief glimpses of it through framing cell phones that students use rather indifferently to take pictures of the gruesome scene. Her classmates gathered to watch this tragic event, indifferently picking up their phones to take pictures and spread the news, while Chen Nian walked over and covered the dead with her clothes to show respect for her. After the incident, the police questioned Chen Nian and asked her, "Why did you do this? Are you not

close with her?" Chen Nian said, "The girl who passed away shouldn't want everyone to see what she looked like at the end". The reply captures the fact that appearances and representation have become more central than the real experiences of these youth. In Chen Nian's high school, kindness has become an unusual behavior, indicating the ruthlessness of that world. The police should question those who did not care for the dead girl and make a fuss by taking pictures, not those who have taken action.

In order to prevent students from jumping off the building again, the school installed protective fences on each floor instead of focusing on psychological counseling for students. The construction of iron fences makes the already constricting and impersonal campus even more impersonal and looks like a prison.



Figure 2.1: The school installed "prison-like" fences (Tsang, *Better Days* 2019)

After school, a group of bullying girls threatened Chen Nian not to tell the police that they had bullied Hu Xiaodie, the girl who committed suicide. The bullying leader was Wei Lai, a girl with excellent grades and beautiful looks. She began to bully Chen Nian, spreading the news

that Chen Nian's mother was doing illegal business. Since the mobile phones make news spread at a faster speed, the whole school learned about the scandal at Chen Nian's home pretty quickly. Chen Nian was completely isolated at school. During Physical Education lessons, no one dared to catch Chen Nian's ball or interact with her, and no one stood up to support her. The phenomenon reflects the drawbacks of collectivism: the more people present, the less likely that anyone would step up to be the person who raises a different perspective. However, doing nothing when bullying happens is the cruelest behavior.

Wei Lai continued to bully Chen Nian, cutting her hair, taking indecent photos of her and posting them online. Chen Nian endured all of this silently, and the only thought that motivated her to stay strong and move forward in adversity was that she would leave all these people behind and start a new life after the college entrance examination. But the college entrance examination is not a key to enter “adulthood”. Will Chinese adolescents become mature psychologically after the exam? Chinese high schools only focus on student performance and ignore the mental health of teenagers, which makes them not mentally prepared as they move from high school to university.

The ending of the film *Better Days* (2019) is satisfactory. The conflicts between Chen Nian and Wei Lai continued to intensify until one day, Chen Nian couldn't bear it any more and pushed Wei Lai hard down the stairs, resulting in Wei Lai's accidental death. Chen Nian went to jail after the college entrance examination she prepared for the whole year. Despite all her efforts and hopes, the national examination did not change Chen Nian's destiny, and she was charged with murder. The film proposes a solution by fastforwarding the story to five years later. Chen Nian becomes a teacher, noticing a girl in her class possibly being bullied. She recognizes problems right away and pays attention to girls' psychological growth. The story of the bullied

girl, Chen Nian, ending up in jail is cruel but thought-provoking. It makes people ponder about what is the meaning of Chinese education? What can the schools do to prevent such tragedies? How does the family environment influence the phenomenon of bullying, and who can parents do? The following content analyzes these questions and proposes possible solutions for preventing bullying in Chinese high schools.

Campus Bullying in China

Chinese school bullying is rarely taken seriously because most Chinese schools care about grades, and parents have always regarded grades as an essential criterion for a student. However, schools often neglect young people's mental health, which is much more critical than grades. A person's life is very long, and academic performance can only represent the part of the student era. The rest of one's life depends on a person's mentality, character, and psychological state. Although there are only a few reports, bullying in Chinese schools is very common. Peer victimization can lead to negative actions such as attacks, harm, and intimidation, driven repeatedly by peers' conscious, deliberate and aggressive intentions. Bullying victimization may also lead to severe short-term and long-term adverse outcomes, especially psychosocial disorders such as anxiety, loneliness, low self-efficacy, and even dysfunctional behavior. Researches found that suicide has become the leading cause of death among 15–34 years old in China. Yang, Guo, Hong, Wang, & Lu (2020) used a univariate logistic model and found that compared to boys, girls were more likely to report having suicidal ideation or suicide attempts due to bullying.

Only by facing the cruel consequences of bullying squarely can we better solve this phenomenon. *Better Days* (2019) is a compelling educational film that reveals the cruel side of many Chinese high schools. It is undeniable that bullying has caused great harm to the mind and body of young people. This situation needs to be exposed and discussed in Chinese universities.

The public should acknowledge this undesirable phenomenon on campus and spread the knowledge about bullying prevention. When a student commits suicide in a school, educators should pay attention to strengthening the mental health of the students, instead of adding maintenance fences to turn the school into a colder place. Compared to learning knowledge, the meaning of attending high schools is more about learning how to get along with others and preparing Chinese adolescents for entering society.



Figure 2.2: Chen Nian being bullied and recorded (Tsang, *Better Days* 2019)

When bullying occurs in schools, the inaction of witnesses can cause the victims to receive unnecessary harm. When students see someone being bullied, most of them choose to be a bystander rather than a leader to prevent the incident from happening. Hawkins et al. (2016) found that although bystanders were present in 88 % of bullying episodes, they only intervened and defended victims in 19 % of cases in the U.S. Wu et al. (2016) suggest that victims had a higher frequency of protecting behaviors than bystanders. Higher defending behaviors was associated with higher social anxiety and depressive symptoms. In bystanders, defending actions were positively related to social anxiety and depressive symptoms. Therefore, bullying can cause

psychological harm to both the victim and bystanders. Bystanders feel uneasy in conscience, while victims think that they are unworthy of being loved and cared for.

The nature of bullying is not static. As society has changed and developed, new forms of bullying have been identified, and appropriate labels are constructed to describe them. Maunder and Crafter (2018) examines research on school bullying through the lens of sociocultural theorizing. They argue that sociocultural theory provides a mechanism for understanding cognitive development in interaction and social and emotional learning through shared cultural school spaces with peers and teachers. For instance, contextual factors about incidents determine whether they are perceived as bullying and whether or not teachers will intervene. A quantitative survey found that teachers rated physical and verbal bullying more seriously than socially orientated bullying. Their judgments about the seriousness of an incident predicted their likelihood to intervene. Maunder et al. (2018) also suggest that the same bullying incident may be interpreted and responded to differently based on the amount of harm caused and the setting where it occurred. The same incident was also judged more harshly when the individual being bullied experienced more damage from it. Since people with different life experiences have different understandings of bullying, there is no standard definition of bullying, so it is difficult to use rules and regulations to prevent it.

To make matters worse, with the development of technology, the forms of bullying began to diversify. A single incident can snowball due to others sharing it, making it even more challenging to ascertain the origins of power by the perpetrator in cyberbullying. Peng, Klomek & Li (2019) suggest that adolescents who were victims of both traditional and cyberbullying had more significant risks of adverse outcomes of suicidal ideation self-harm attempts. Those exposed to both forms of bullying should be routinely screened for suicidal risk. Therefore

school-based anti-bully interventions should target both bullying and cyberbullying. The film mentions steps China has taken to fight bullying as can be seen in the minute before the credits roll.

The Role of the School in Bullying

_____Most people choose to be bystanders rather than protect the victims of bullying in high schools in China. Huang, Liu, Lv, , Zhang, Ou and Li (2016) found that higher grade students were more apt to be involved in passive bystander behaviors. Their study showed that sedentary bystander behavior was related to an increase in peer victimization. Meanwhile, peer victims were more likely to be involved in passive bystander behaviors. The interchange with peer victimization and bystander behaviors hinted that the absence of bystander education could result in China's bullying behaviors. Literature about bystander intervention effectively reduced bullying behaviors, which indicated that bystanders were more likely to stop bullying behaviors when they had a responsibility to intervene, felt confident in their skills, and had faith in the value of intervening beyond the costs. If schools can strengthen education and raise awareness of not being a bystander, reducing the bystander effect can effectively prevent bullying.



Figure 2.3: The Bullies (Tsang, *Better Days* 2019)



Figure 2.4: The Target (Tsang, *Better Days* 2019)

Young people are spending increasing amounts of time using digital technology and, as such, are at great risk of being involved in cyberbullying as a victim. Despite cyber bullying typically occurring outside the school environment, the impact of being involved in cyberbullying is likely to spill over to the school environment. Cyberbullying is defined as “bullying and harassment of others by means of new electronic technologies, primarily mobile phones and the internet”. Compared with traditional bullying, cyberbullying has a unique nature with respect to publicity, anonymity, and the lack of supervision, which can lead to substantial psychological problems among victims. Furthermore, cyberbullying sometimes overlaps with traditional bullying and potentially leaves profound health impacts on victims. Wang, Musumari, Techasrivichien, Suguimoto, Tateyama, Chan & Nakayama (2019) suggest that, with the rapid development and dissemination of information and communication technologies (ICTs), many adolescents use the internet and social networking services (SNSs), which increases the opportunities for cyberbullying.

For young women, involvement in cyberbullying as a victim negatively predicted perceptions of learning and school, and perceived peer acceptance mediated this relationship. Betts, Spenser & Gardner (2017) suggests that for young women, experiences outside school impact their perceptions of learning and school. Specifically, involvement in cyberbullying as a victim adversely impacted young women’s attitudes toward school. Therefore, schools should consider interventions that reduce cyber bullying that focus on strengthening and improving social networks, especially for young women. For young women, the role of perceived peer acceptance as a mediator in the relationship between cyber bullying involvement as a victim and perceptions of learning and school suggests that key to buffering young women from the adverse effects of cyberbullying is to develop their social relationships. Consequently, enhancing young

women's social relationship quality would likely help to protect them from the negative effects of involvement in cyberbullying.

School climate, especially the relation with teachers and relation with peers are significant protective factors in being bullied. Han, Zhang & Zhang (2017) point out that, contrary to the belief that students from good schools are better behaved, students in leading schools had a 38% higher likelihood of reporting being bullied and a 24% higher likelihood of reporting the witnessing of bullying. Their study also revealed that the relation with teachers, the relation with classmates and self-reported GPA ranking were protective factors, in general. With better relationships with teachers, the student would have lower probability to report being bullied, to be a perpetrator and to witness bullying scenarios.

In China, almost no schools have psychological counselors. There is also little opportunity for the teacher to understand what happens between students. Therefore, if a psychological counselor can be arranged for each school, the bullying phenomenon should be improved by constructing and strengthening communication links. Chinese high schools can assign a psychology teacher to each class, and through companionship and communication, students can build a sense of trust with this psychological counselor. This teacher can better understand the real situation of the relationship between students in a class than the teacher in charge. Yang, Wang & Lei (2020) suggest that adolescents who perceive a positive school climate were less likely to bully others and moral disengagement mediated this relationship. Therefore, it is important to establish close communication between students and teachers. This makes students feel that the school is a good and positive learning and growth environment, thereby reducing the occurrence of bullying.

The Role of Family Environment in Bullying

_____ Compared with the students who mainly live with their parents, Murphy, Laible & Augustine (2017) suggest that adolescents who primarily lived with a single parent or grandparents have a higher probability of reporting the experiencing of bullying. Murphy et al.(2017) also suggest that greater attachment security to parents and peers was associated with less involvement in bullying and greater defending of victims. These results indicate that having a secure attachment to peers may be a potentially protective factor against bullying involvement for males with insecure attachments to parents. Attachment theorists stressed the importance of the parent-child bond for the development of children's social competence. Thus, if parents have responded to children's needs for protection with sensitivity and warmth, children construct working models of the self and others as worthy and respond to relational partners with warmth and affection. On the other hand, insecure individuals have lower emotion regulation abilities, maladaptive social information processing, and more deficient social problem-solving skills, which can all contribute to a greater propensity for bullying.



Figure 2.5: Bystanders (*Tsang, Better Days 2019*)



Figure 2.6: Cyberbullying (*Tsang, Better Days 2019*)

A healthy respect for their elders is inculcated in adolescents in the cultural context of most Asian countries. In particular, communication between parents and adolescents is based on a respectful conversation about family roles, relationships, and other social issues. As noted

above, Chinese culture generally emphasizes respect for authority. Chinese parents are more restrictive and more control-oriented than their American counterparts, and they tend to use more commands and attempt to directly control their children's attention. Therefore, it is noteworthy that parental understanding and monitoring play a protective role in improving mental well-being, while parental control is a risk factor for increasing mental health problems during the adolescent period. Nguyen & Linh (2019) found that a high level of parental involvement is related to a reduced likelihood of poor mental health among adolescents, while a lack of parental warmth and high maternal over-control is associated with a wide range of psychological problems, including depression, suicidal behavior, and self-harm among adolescents. Therefore, when parents communicate with teenagers, they should put aside their superior position and communicate with their children from an equal angle. Establishing good communication channels can ease the psychological pressure of young people, thereby reducing and preventing bullying.

Among the adolescents who reported being bullied, approximately 2% of the parents said this same problem, whereas about 5% did not report that their child had been victimized. The parents were also more likely to tell their female children to ignore the problem or do nothing about it. In *My Best Summer* (2019), Geng Geng's parents advise her to choose "girly" career paths such as teachers or nurses and discourage her from wanting to become a scientist. Parents still hold gender stereotypes, and they may see males as being more aggressive, courageous, independent, and assertive and females as more emotional, sensitive, people-oriented, and reliant. Larrañaga, Yubero & Navarro (2018) discovered that most parents reported responding to their child's victimization by contacting a teacher from the school, followed by controlling internet access and cellphone use. Nevertheless, a high percentage of parents also recommended

maladaptive strategies for coping or responding to bullying, such as ignoring bullying or encouraging their child to defend herself/himself. Researchers have shown that talking to children about victimization and contacting the school is more appropriate than ignoring the problem or getting the bully. These responses can have negative corollaries for the victimized child.

In all, parents are encouraged to work collaboratively with schools to intervene and prevent bullying by increasingly more researchers. Adolescents who have a negative perception of their family environment recognize that they have less ability and resources to face common social problems, of which bullying and cyberbullying are among the most frequent. Parental support is an important environmental factor that affects adolescents' development; many studies have shown that adolescents with parental backing have higher motivation, better academic performance, better levels of life satisfaction, and self-esteem.

Parents can also provide autonomy support, which helps their children get valuable information, recognize emotional experience, and feel smaller pressure. Ma & Wang (2019) define autonomy support as a way individuals think of essential others' support for their free choice and independent decision. Parental consent can effectively predict college students' social competence.

Chinese Education: Transition from High School to University

University life is a process of adaptation to changes at the juncture between school and social life, and undergraduate students, in particular, are in a critical transitional period. The changes in this period affect the psychosocial and emotional development and mental health of undergraduates. The American Psychological Association has defined psychological resilience as "a process of good adaptation in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or other significant

sources of stressors such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems or financial problems"(American Psychological Association, 2020). It can be viewed as a measure of stress coping ability in response to adversity and is used as a target in treating depression, anxiety, and stress problems. Low psychological resilience is related to several mental health problems among patients, such as anxiety, depression, and stress. Yu et al.(2020) found that undergraduates with a higher total resilience score and better mood control, self-plasticity, and coping flexibility experienced more positive coping styles. The findings suggest that undergraduates with higher psychological resilience levels, medical majors, and females may exhibit more positive behaviors to cope with stressful and adverse psychological problems than their peers with lower psychological resilience. It can be seen that, compared with grades, psychological resilience is a more important quality that determines whether a young person can adapt to university life. China's high school education is very lacking in the education of psychological construction. Teenagers who ignore their mental health in high school would significantly increase the difficulty of their transition from high school to university.

Conclusion

Bullying on campus is common worldwide, but the lack of attention to mental health in Chinese education has made it particularly difficult to prevent bullying. Cyberbullying is also becoming more familiar with adolescents' increasing activities in cyberspace. Cyberbullying experience can cause various mental health, social-psychological, and behavioral problems, such as emotional and psychological distress, social anxiety, aggression and hostility, fear, depression, hyperactivity disorder, substance use, self-harm, suicidal ideation and attempts. Compared with traditional bullying, the impact of cyberbullying may be more invisible since it does not cause

immediate physical harm. Therefore, educators should take both cyberbullying and traditional bullying seriously.

School and family are the two micro-social environments that students interacted with in daily life. Therefore parents and schools should work together to improve bullying. Zhang, Han & Bai (2020) point out that family cohesion and school cohesion are protective factors of psychological distress. Individual, peer relationships, family, school, and community factors, are potential protective factors against the involvement of bullying and cyberbullying and their possible social psychological consequences. Many studies have shown that the sense of security students get at home and the importance of belonging they get at school can reduce their likelihood of becoming bullied and increase their chances of reporting bullying. School belonging is an important protective factor, which has a significant and negative direct effect on mental distress. Moreover, researches suggested that the relationship between school belonging and depression was mediated by purpose in life. In other words, emerging adults who attend school could improve their mental health problems by enhancing their sense of school belonging through purpose in life.

Chinese high schools need to facilitate the establishment of communication bridges between teachers and students, such as arranging psychological counselors' roles to make sure that students have some authority figures to talk to when encountering bullying. At the same time, schools can better understand the relationship between students and their mental health. Schools could also implement positive psychology interventions to ease mental distress.



Figure 2.7: Graduation photo (Tsang, *Better Days* 2019)

In families, whether it is a single-parent or two-parent family, parents should accompany their children to make them feel cared for and loved. According to Zhang (2020), the studies suggest that family cohesion and school cohesion are protective factors of psychological distress. Still, only family cohesion plays a moderating effect between cyberbullying involvement and pain. Parents must be aware of how they can impact adolescents' involvement in cyberbullying as bullies and victims. Parents should also give greater attention to developing parental intervention programs that focus on parents' role in mitigating adolescents' likelihood of cyberbullying involvement. Parents should not let their children face the bullying situation alone. Benatov (2019) suggests that bullying prevention efforts should include parents and address the complicated feelings of guilt and anger, which researchers contributed to a maladaptive coping reaction. Parents' feelings of sadness and remorse appeared to contribute to a more adaptive coping response since they tended to be positively linked to child support and negatively related to avoidance. These feelings may be closer to the child's mental pain after being bullied, thus enabling a more adaptive response. When making decisions, parents should give their children a certain degree of freedom and support their choices while protecting them. Giving adolescents

freedom of choice can help young people build independence and better realize the transition from high school to university. Having parents to talk to might help adolescents feel like what happens to them matters, leading them to seek out support and guidance from their parents concerning online experiences. The benefit of parental mediation of technology use is that it encourages continuous communication between parents and their children regarding their life experiences.

Chapter 3: *Eighth Grade*

"Just because things are happening to you right now, doesn't mean they're always going to happen to you. You never know what's going to happen next, and that's what makes things exciting and scary. And fun. " - Eighth Grade



Figure 3.0: Kayla Day, a middle school teenager (*Burnham, Eighth Grade 2018*)

Burnham's film *Eighth Grade* (2018) tells the story of a girl named Kayla Day in her eighth grade. Kayla is a very socially awkward girl: she always tries to express herself as "cool" by saying some popular words, but it always causes embarrassment. She posts motivational videos about self-confidence on YouTube, but no one watches it; she tries to make friends at school but is always rejected by popular girls; she considers herself very good at communicating but wins the "most quiet" award judged by students. Although her eighth-grade life is not going well, she keeps encouraging herself by posting positive videos about being one's self; as she said, "Being yourself is not changing yourself to be someone else. Being yourself can be hard. People can make fun of you. You have to ignore them and not hear what they are saying. Just be yourself, and don't care about what other people think of you" (*Eighth Grade 2018*).

In the film, we are introduced to Kennedy, the most popular girl in Kayla's school. Kayla appears homely in comparison to the beautiful Kennedy. Just like everyone's middle school experience, the feeling of being invisible and even interior is very common. One day, Kayla is invited to a pool party hosted by Kennedy, but she dares not to go because she is not confident enough. The audience is taken along for Kayla's sobering anxiety attack which is very realistically captured by Kayla cheering herself up by making a Youtube video about putting oneself out there, fake it until one makes it. When Kayla was changing her bathing suit in the bathroom, she looked into the mirror and had an anxiety attack. Instead of escaping from the party, she said to herself, "You have to put yourself out there, face your fears so that people can get to know the real you. It doesn't matter if you are scared, because everyone is scared." In the end, she musters up the courage to overcome her fear. However, only one kid, Gade, talks to Kayla at the party, and Kennedy dismisses her carefully selected gifts. Kayla is continuously ignored and excluded, feeling very sad, crying, and calling her father to pick her up before the party is over.

In a telling scene in which Kayla participates in a "High School Shadow" event and experiences a high school life day with a high school student, she finally feels the sense of conformity and belongingness. At the event, she meets Olivia, who immediately likes her. Olivia invites Kayla and some of her friends to hang out in the Palisades Center Mall. Kayla finally has friends, which makes her feel very happy and thinks that she has some value. At the mall, Kayla tries to join those high school students' conversations, but she still can't get involved. She always feels that she is incompatible with these "cool people." Unfortunately, Kayla feels like an "outcast" again, being the only "uncool" person at her school, while everyone else seems cooler than her.

Kayla relies heavily on social media. When she wakes up every morning, she always puts her makeup on and takes selfies with different filters on Snapchat. Every night, Kayla spends a lot of time on the Internet, watching others' happy lives and secretly spying on Aiden, who Kayla has a crush on. The audience is “quarantined” in the social media world with Kayla and isolated from the actual story world. When Kayla has dinner with her dad, she always wears headphones and listens to music, blocking out the rest of the world. Kayla's single father always tries to communicate with his daughter, but social media keeps them apart. The single dad notices Kayla's lack of confidence and keeps trying to tell her that she was perfect and cool in his eyes, but Kayla does not believe a word her dad tells her.

In another telling scene, we are introduced to a time capsule Kayla made for herself, on her box saying, "To the coolest girl in the world." This is an expectation that is not fulfilled; in fact, disappointment in the coming-age-process is the result. When she holds the box again, she is so disappointed with her lousy self that she asks her father to help her burn the time capsule. She is so self-doubt that she asks her father if she makes him sad too. Her father tells Kayla that she has always made him so proud, and he would never feel sorry for her life. On the contrary, he thinks it is so cool for Kayla insisting on being herself. Her father's words make her feel relieved and touched, and Kayla reconciles the relationship with her father.

Upon her graduation, it is inspiring for the audience to see that Kayla finally rebukes Kennedy for ignoring her. Although Kayla tries to be friendly, Kennedy has always been mean to Kayla by being indifferent to her and ignoring her completely. Kayla has re-made a new time capsule, and she leaves a video message for herself in the future, "Confidence is a choice. You can start acting like it, even if you are not. You can act like it before you can feel it. A big part of Confidence is to be scared. You can't be brave without being scared. You can make yourself

confident." Although life in eighth grade is awkward and difficult for Kayla, she keeps encouraging herself and insisting on being herself.

Eighth Grade (2018) records the process of an American girl who continues to find self-worth and build self-confidence. In real life, most girls have experienced the lack of self-confidence, self-doubt, and the psychological growth stage that Kayla has experienced. The eighth grade is a critical age, because teenagers are easily influenced by various values, especially for sensitive teenage girls. These different values come from the people and things that young people come into contact with during their growth. In this chapter, I discuss the two factors most likely to affect young girls: friendship and social media. I will analyze how these two factors affect the psychological growth of young people, and put forward suggestions on how to better protect them and let them build self-confidence and positive values.

Social Media Influences the Psychological Growth of American Adolescents

Mobile phones are an essential part of an adolescent's life, leading them to text, phone, or message into the night. Research has found that increased night-time mobile phone use was directly associated with increased externalizing behavior and decreased self-esteem and coping. Mobile phones are an essential tool for youths' social interaction. Many adolescents report phones are indispensable to their social life and that they "can't live without their phones" (Lenhart, Smith, Anderson, Duggan & Perrin, 2015; Ling & Haddon, 2008). Internationally, around 80% of youth have access to a mobile phone, which they chiefly use to message their peers or call their close friends. In the movie, not only Kayla, but almost all the students in middle school are "attached" to their phones twenty four seven.

The ubiquitous nature of mobile phones allows for one-on-one communication and instantaneous mass communication, enabling adolescents to reach a diverse range of peers from

close friends to distant acquaintances (Ling & Haddon, 2008). As a result, adolescents consider the mobile phone as their own "private" device to send and receive messages autonomous of parental influence, cultivating their identity, autonomy, and self-esteem. Social media has become an increasingly popular leisure activity over the last decade. Although most people's social media use is non-problematic, a small number of users appear to engage in social media excessively or compulsively. Andreassen, Pallesen & Griffiths (2017) examine the associations between addictive use of social media, narcissism, and self-esteem, and found that lower age, being a woman, being a student, lower self-esteem, and narcissism was associated with higher scores on the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale. The findings suggest that addictive social media use reflects a need to feed the ego, such as narcissistic personality traits and any attempt to inhibit a negative self-evaluation. The results also indicate that women may develop more addictive use of activities involving social interaction than men.

Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and other social media applications may serve as an ideal social place for individuals who appreciate and are attracted to engaging in ego-enhancing activities (Ryan and Xenos, 2011, Wang et al., 2012), as they enable individuals to bolster their egos based on instant feedback from large numbers of other individuals. Narcissism is positively related to the addictive use of social media. Individuals with elevated narcissistic traits use social media excessively because these online platforms may fulfill a need for affiliation and confirm the sense of an idealized self. The research also suggests that people use social media to obtain higher self-esteem and escape from feelings of low self-esteem. People with low self-image may also prefer communicating online instead of face-to-face, because they could "hide" behind the screens and be someone else. In this era, when the Internet is well-developed, young people who

lack self-confidence or narcissistic are prone to indulge in social networks, which primarily change young people's psychology.



Figure 3.1: Kayla checks social media (*Burnham, Eighth Grade 2018*)

In addition to spending time on social networks, taking selfies appears to be shared among adolescents, although posting selfies online is less frequent. McLean, Jarman & Rodgers (2019) found that viewing selfies online appears to harm adolescents' well-being and body confidence, at least in the short term in experimental contexts. Specifically, seeking and placing importance on others' feedback may also be a harmful aspect of selfie practices. Social acceptance is essential during the adolescent period. In the film, the first thing Kayla does in the morning is to take a selfie and self-checks her "beauty status." Qualitative studies have indicated the extent to which selfie posting, and responses and feedback, particularly in terms of the number of likes received, plays a role in social acceptance for adolescent girls. The findings suggest that young people must negotiate a challenging balance between the pressure to gain peer recognition through "likes" and the absence of an effort to achieve such recognition at the

same time. This double bind may likely place adolescents under increased stress, particularly those for whom self-esteem is strongly linked to external validation.



Figure 3.2: Kayla plays on her phone while having dinner (*Burnham, Eighth Grade 2018*)

Selfie posting may activate appearance comparisons with internalized appearance standards, such that adolescents may compare their selfies to idealized images seen in corporate media. The editing and posting of digitally modified selfies may generate social comparisons with an idea but unrealistic online self-presentation. In addition to examining body confidence outcomes, other studies have examined relationships between selfie practices and self-objectification, that is, the extent to which individuals internalize an external observer's perspective of their body. The consequence of this attention may be more attention or monitoring of the body and a negative assessment of the body. Therefore, the motivation and process of taking selfies and posting selfies on social media put pressure on adolescents' psychology. When browsing other people's selfies, unconfident teenagers are even less confident or worse, engaging in body shame.

Social media has become an integrated part of daily life, with an estimated 3 billion social media users worldwide. Adolescents and young adults are the most active users of social media. Yau & Reich(2018) explored adolescents' awareness of their audience and subsequent self-presentation practices on Facebook and Instagram through focus group discussions. Findings suggest that teens, who are developmentally able to perceive a situation from the third-person perspective and value peer approval, purposefully share content to appear interesting, well-liked, and attractive. Some teens invested significant effort into posting these norms, even asking their friends to help; however, this was more common among girls. These findings suggest that perspective-taking skills and the need for peer approval influence self-presentation online.

Compared to teenagers, older teens felt that maintaining connections with peers they barely knew was not meaningful, which can be explained by the declining importance of popularity. Teens become more autonomous and seek intimacy through individual relationships. Furthermore, older adolescents demonstrated more advanced perspective-taking skills than early adolescents, explaining how others might interpret their posts differently from what they had intended. Older teens are also aware of how positions might influence a third person's perception of the recipient. In all, the sense of belonging that group membership provides becomes less critical as adolescents grow older. Beyens, Frison & Eggermont (2016) used an integrative model to examine the mediating role of adolescents' fear of missing out (FoMO) in the relationships of adolescents' need to belong with adolescents' Facebook use. They found that increased FoMO was associated with increased pressure associated with Facebook use. The results emphasize the critical role that FoMO plays in adolescents' media use and well-being. Social networks have a more negative influence on young people who are relatively young. Therefore adults need to

"regulate" their teenager's use of the Internet. Online comments and images easily influence teenagers, and they value other people's comments on them. Adults should encourage young people to form their own beliefs instead of being swayed by public opinion on the Internet.

Social networking brings both adverse and positive effects to young people. Positive use included searching for approving content, such as entertainment, humor, content creation, or social connection. Harmful use included sharing risky behaviors, cyberbullying, and making self-denigrating comparisons with others. In all, using social media in a purposeful way to connect with friends and family may lead to a decrease in depression and improved quality of life. Adolescents' perspective on the purpose of social media changes to connecting with others who are known to be supportive.

Peer Relationship and Social Acceptance

Friendships play a central role in youth's social and emotional development and have long been thought to be protective against the development of psychopathology. This may be especially pronounced for girls, who report having more and higher quality friendships. Peer relationships are associated with essential and adaptive functions, such as providing social support (Parker et al.2006) and buffering against stressful events' adverse effects (Evans et al., 2013). Recent research suggests that friendships don't uniformly lead to positive outcomes. Some companies are characterized by dysfunctional relational styles that promote maladaptive behaviors, such as disordered eating, drug use, or bullying (Dishion and Tipsord, 2011). Girls are more likely to engage in rumination, associated with the development of mental health problems, and report higher levels of friendship quality, hypothesized to protect against these disorders. Felton, Cole, Havewala, Kurdziel & Brown(2018) examined whether co-rumination may simultaneously increase rumination and changes in friendship quality among adolescents.

Co-rumination refers to an excessive discussion of problems and focuses on negative feelings occurring within a dyadic relationship. When examined in offline contexts, it has shown associations with more significant internalizing symptoms (Rose 2002). Felton et al.(2018) found that there was also a bidirectional relation between-rumination and positive friendship quality, indicating that the improvement in peer relationships may be a powerful reinforcer of engaging in further co-rumination. Peers may use positive reinforcement to influence one another to engage in specific behaviors associated with adverse behavioral and psychological outcomes. Given the steep increases in mental health problems across adolescence, especially among girls, these findings point to co-rumination as a possible target for improving longer-term adjustment during this vulnerable developmental period.



Figure 3.3: Kayla tries to socialize (*Burnham, Eighth Grade 2018*)

Research has shown also that individual differences in theory of mind (ToM) during middle childhood are linked with individual differences in children's peer relationships. Theory of mind is an essential social-cognitive skill that involves thinking about mental states, both your

own and those of others. It encompasses the ability to attribute mental states, including emotions, desires, beliefs, and knowledge. Ronchi, Banerjee & Lecce (2020) conduct a longitudinal study investigating this association more deeply, exploring the potential mediating role played by children's social anxiety. Social anxiety is characterized by worries of being evaluated negatively during social interactions or during performance situations, which causes emotional distress and disturbs the individual's social functioning (Beidel & Morris, 1995). Ronchi et al.(2020) focused on social anxiety as a possible mediator in the expected developmental link between children's ToM and peer relationships in middle childhood.

Social anxiety is associated with difficulties in mental-state understanding. Ronchi et al. (2020) find that inferring and reasoning about others' mental states could exacerbate children's concerns and emotional distress in social encounters. For example, difficulties in understanding others' mental states and behavior make social situations less predictable, thus increasing children's uncertainty and social anxiety. Better ToM shortly after starting secondary school predicted lower levels of social anxiety over time, which, in turn, predicted higher levels of peer acceptance and lower levels of peer rejection one year later. Therefore, facilitating young people to develop their theory of mind will decrease their anxiety and self-doubt, eliminating fluctuated psychology and emotions. Van den Bedem, Willems, Dockrell, Van Alphen & Rieffe (2019) examined the interrelation of friendship quality and empathy development and found a bidirectional relation between empathy and friendship quality across time. In other words, for teenagers with unstable friendships, more cognitive empathy was related to fewer negative friendship features. Positive friendship features, in turn, contributed to a higher spirit. These results imply that positive friendship features are essential for developing empathic skills and vice versa that empathy enables adolescents to grow in friendship quality.



Figure 3.4: Popular girls at school (*Burnham, Eighth Grade 2018*)

Friendships have been linked to mental health and school attainment in adolescents. They fulfill several vital functions for young adolescents, influencing feelings of self-worth and buffering against life stress. Ng-Knight, Shelton, Riglin, Frederickson, McManus & Rice (2018) study the role of friendship stability and suggest that teenagers who kept the same best friend had higher academic attainment and lower levels of conduct problems. Helping maintain children's best friendships during the transition of schools may contribute to higher academic performance and better mental health. A best friend's social support is an essential protective factor for understanding individual differences in responses to stressful events. In *Eighth Grade* (2018), popular girls at school with regular friends are more adaptable to the school environment, behave more comfortably and happily, and have a stronger sense of self-confidence and belonging. In contrast, the lonely Kayla seems very inferior and insecure. She has been trying to fit in with groups of people, sometimes even wronged and disguised herself, hiding her personality to achieve the goal of making friends. It can be seen that friendship plays a big role in the growth of

young people. In line with the research, social support afforded by stable friendships is likely to be an essential resource for teenagers experiencing the turbulence of school transitions during early adolescence. This shows that company is significant to young people, and parents should provide support to help children maintain a stable friendship, assist children in making meaning from their friendship experiences, and provide practitioners with the opportunity to nurture and scaffold children through their friendship experiences in schools. Carter & Nutbrown (2016) suggest a need to raise the profile of children's friendships in early childhood education and generate an educational perspective on friendship. Listening to children's views of a company would be beneficial to children's all-around learning and development.

Peers are vital for children's social and emotional functioning in almost every aspect of their lives. This is partly because meaningful contacts with peers offer children unique opportunities to get acquainted with the social norms involved in interpersonal relationships and practice prosocial behavior (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Consequently, being rejected by the peer group and thereby being excluded from meaningful contacts with peers has devastating effects on a child's future development. Abandoned children have been found to experience higher levels of anxiety, loneliness, and depression. Therefore, peer rejection is a severe cause for concern. Loneliness is a significant problem in early adolescence (van Dulmen & Goossens 2013). Lonely adolescents report that they have poor social skills. Lodder, Goossens, Scholte, Engels & Verhagen (2016) compared self-reported social skills evaluations with peer-reported social skills and meta-evaluations of social skills and found that when self-, peer- and meta-evaluation were similar, a greater sense of loneliness was related to lower social skills. Thus, for some lonely adolescents, loneliness may be associated with an actual social skills deficit. Van der Wilt, Van der Veen, Van Kruistum & Van Oers (2019) investigate factors

contributing to children become rejected by their peers and suggest that compared with other children, disliked children were more likely to demand and suggest themes and roles, to leave others' ideas and to spend a relatively substantial proportion of the conversation describing their activity or contributions to play. The research points out that effective communication, which contributes to coherent discourse, is persuasive and anticipates the conversational partner positively related to social acceptance. The ability to communicate effectively seems essential for children's position within their peer group; therefore, adults could include interventions to improve children's sociometric status.

Adolescents' friendships are essential for well-being and school adjustment. Maunder & Monks(2018) surveyed teenagers about their companies, best friendships, friendship quality and indices of self-worth, identification with peers, and school identification. They found that peer relationships were positively related to self-worth but not identification with peers or school. Adolescents with a reciprocated best friend had higher friendship quality and peer identification than others. The results suggest that friendship reciprocity is particularly relevant for children's self-worth and identification with peers. Children with poorer self-worth maybe those with more inferior quality best friendships and fewer reciprocated friends. Thus, having a high-quality friendship may positively shape the individual's perceptions of other peers. Furthermore, having a good quality friendship may be an indicator of broader social skills (Fink, Begeer, Peterson, Slaughter, & de Rosnay, 2015), which may facilitate peer interactions and promote a more positive view of the broader peer group.



Figure 3.5: Kayla being excluded at a party (*Burnham, Eighth Grade 2018*)

There is substantial evidence that personality traits, such as self-criticism and dependency, predict the development of depression and anxiety symptoms, as well as depressive episodes. Kopala-Sibley, Klein, Perlman & Kotov (2017) suggest that self-criticism and dependency predict risk for the first onset of internalizing disorders in early female adolescents. Results indicate that educators should be mindful of self-criticism levels or dependence in female adolescents as these appear to increase the risk for internalizing psychopathology. However, there are multiple other risk factors to consider as well. In all, youth may benefit from interventions designed to reduce levels of dependency or self-criticism directly.

Conclusion

_____ Adolescence is a crucial period for investigating patterns of change and stability in self-concept clarity (SCC). SCC indicates the extent to which self-beliefs are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable (Crocetti et al., 2015). Indeed, it is during adolescence that the search for an enduring sense of “self” turns into a core

developmental task, stimulated by the biological, cognitive, and social changes that characterize this period of the life span (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). Thus, during adolescence, individuals may rethink their previous sense of self and experiment with new roles, and life plans to find a set of goals and values that fit their aspirations and potentials. Adolescents undergo multiple biological, cognitive, and social changes that trigger the reorganization of their self-concept. Parents can provide their children with relational contexts that stimulate exploration of self-options and alternatives and foster the enactment of meaningful commitments and identity choices. As a result, adolescents can better understand who they are by looking at their parents' levels of self-consistency.

Adolescent loneliness can have adverse impacts on short- and long-term health status. Social isolation and loneliness have adverse implications for the health of the teenagers experiencing them. Educators assessing loneliness in adolescents should consider friendship and loneliness to more accurately capture students' experiences of social isolation. Loneliness should be monitored and addressed as part of comprehensive school and community health plans because social isolation cannot be resolved with interventions focused solely on individuals. Practical initiatives to reduce social isolation must be rooted in communities.

Social media may transform the frequency and immediacy of contact and support within friendships, alter the quality of communication processes, amplify communication demands, and create opportunities for exclusive online companies. Nesi, Choukas-Bradley & Prinstein (2018) find that social media may amplify and increase the frequency of problematic interpersonal behaviors that typically occur within dyadic relationships, such as social comparison, co-rumination, reassurance- and feedback-seeking. Evidence suggests that comfort- and feedback-seeking actions do occur on social media and may negatively affect youth. For

example, Hummel & Smith (2015) found that college students who received negative comments after engaging in negative feedback-seeking were more likely to report eating disorder symptoms four weeks later. Engagement in social comparison and feedback-seeking behaviors on social media was positively associated with depressive symptoms, over and above levels of excessive reassurance-seeking.



Figure 3.6: Kayla at Kennedy's birthday party (*Burnham, Eighth Grade 2018*)

Studies suggest that adolescents are spending significant amounts of time on social media. Lin, Vijayalakshmi & Lacznia (2019) study parental views and drivers of parental views on social media influencers and means by which they mediate their adolescents' exposure to social media influencers. They surveyed approximately 200 mothers of adolescents and examined how parents' social media usage is related to their views toward social media influencers and the mediation of social media influencers and found that parents' active use of social media led them to mediate social media influencers' impact significantly. Furthermore, active use of parental mediation increases intrapersonal empowerment resulting in parental

mediation of social media influencers. Therefore, parents can appropriately intervene in the children's social network to protect them. They can guide immature teenagers' ideas, allowing them to look at online speech more critically and form their opinions instead of being negatively influenced by social media.

Chapter 4: *Lady Bird*

“I want you to be the very best version of yourself that you can be.”

“What if this IS the best version of myself?”

- Lady Bird (2017)



Figure 4.0: Lady Bird, a high school adolescent (Gerwig, *Lady Bird* 2017)

The film *Lady Bird* (2017) directed by Gerwig depicts the growth story of an American girl. I chose this movie because it truly represents the mental journey in a rebellious adolescence period: pursuing love and dreams, longing for independence, conflicts, and reconciliation with their parents. When the heroine of the story, 17-year old Christine McPherson, who calls herself Lady Bird, is about to graduate from high school, she is already considering applying to schools outside California, especially in New York, because she wants to get away from home and experience the feast of the big city. In fact, she wants to flee and be far away from anything that to her is like rural, narrow-minded, oppressive. She seeks liberty and freedom in New York. Her

dream place in the US to study could not be further away from California. From West Coast to East Coast.



Figure 4.1: Lady Bird and Marion in the mall (Gerwig, *Lady Bird* 2017)

In adolescence, she and her impatient mother, Marion, are always arguing about all kinds of things. Lady Bird attends a Catholic school and becomes best friends with Julie Steffans. They support and encourage each other and quarrel and alienate, just like every teenager's friendship. After the Christmas holidays and the start of the New Year, Lady Bird begins to make friends with a popular rich girl named Jenna. This friendship puts pressure on her friendship with Julie. To make herself look cool, Lady Bird alienates Julie, does many things against her conscience against her will, and says many things that were not sincere. Since Lady Bird comes from a poor family, she also fabricates her family background, deceiving people that she comes from a wealthy family and lives in a mansion. When all these lies are exposed, she realizes her vanity and feels ashamed of herself. At the graduation prom, Lady Bird no longer insists on compromising everything but follows her own heart, puts on makeup with Julie, and goes to the

prom together. When adolescents face themselves directly and accept themselves, they are one step closer to maturity.

An impressive scene from the movie is that Lady Bird and her mother go to the mall to buy ball gowns. When Marion criticizes the dress she tries on, Lady Bird becomes unhappy. She tells her mother that she wants her to tell her that she is beautiful and that she likes her. Marion says that she has always encouraged her to be her best self, and Lady Bird worries that this is her best version of herself. I feel like when communicating with their children, parents should pay attention to the way of expression so that children can realize that they are loved. Although scolding is often out of good intentions, it creates a gap between the child and the parent.



Figure 4.2: Lady Bird wakes up in the hospital (Gerwig, *Lady Bird* 2017)

Towards the end of the film, the audience is brought by Lady Bird to attend a party at a university in New York. She is very drunk and ends up in the hospital due to alcoholism. After she wakes up, she calls home, saying that she loves and misses Marion very much. And she even misses "home", so Sacramento, the streets she knows, and maybe the guidance she had from her family. The ending is open. Will she return to CA? Probably not. She reached a stage where she

appreciates her home and upbringing. This seems important. Now she is free and ready to explore the world, that is New York to her.

Adolescents always want to get rid of their parents' shackles and explore the world by themselves; and often, after experiencing hardship, they find that the comfort from their parents is the most reassuring and warmest feeling in the world. In this chapter, I analyze American teenagers' psychological growth and the way they get along with their parents. I also discuss how parents should communicate effectively with adolescents in their “rebellious period”, as well as how to discipline their adolescents while not forgetting to make them feel loved.

Adolescence Emotional Development

During the developmental period of adolescence, fundamental shifts occur in physiology, including hormonal changes and maturation of brain structure and function, cognitive capabilities, and emotional expression (Giedd, 2008; Keating, 2004; Susman & Dorn, 2009). This vulnerable period is also characterized by the increased manifestation of psychopathologies such as anxiety, depression, conduct disorders, substance abuse, and phobias (Costello et al., 2003). Successful negotiation of the challenges in adolescence is crucial for adolescents' health and emotional well-being in adulthood. Cultivating self-compassion may help ease the emotional challenges that adolescents face as they traverse this problematic developmental stage. Self-compassion is malleable in adolescents and can be developed through teaching mindfulness and self-compassion skills (Bluth et al., 2015; Edwards et al., 2014; Galla, 2016).

Self-compassion is both a trait and a psychological process and is self-generated during times of emotional struggle. Bluth, Campo, Futch & Gaylord (2016) examine self-compassion levels across adolescence and their association with indicators of emotional well-being, including perceived stress, depressive symptoms, anxiety, life satisfaction, and distress intolerance. They

found that males' level of self-compassion was similar across all ages, whereas older females had the lowest self-compassion levels. These findings parallel the depression literature indicating a dramatic increase in depression in females during high school that is not found in males (Nolen-Hoeksema & Hilt, 2009). The researchers also investigated the association between self-compassion and emotional well-being. They suggested that self-compassion is positively related to positive well-being indicators and inversely related to negative indicators of well-being. In other words, self-compassion was associated with greater life satisfaction and the ability to tolerate distress, as well as less perceived stress.

Mindfulness and self-compassion intervention studies with adolescents indicate significant increases in self-compassion and decreased depressive symptoms and perceived stress post-intervention. Parents and schools should train adolescents' self-compassion skills since it serves a protective function for adolescents' emotional well-being.

Self-concept

This film, like all other films discussed here, is told through the protagonist's eyes: others are perceived through the mind of the main character. For example, the boy Danny who Lady Bird likes: We only see him when Lady Bird is around. If we saw him with his family on other days when Lady Bird is not present, then that would be a more omniscient narrator. Since we are “in the mind of” Lady Bird, it is easier and more direct for us the audience to understand her mental journey as she grows.

People have to experience the world through their perspective (Gilovich et al. 1998). When interacting with others, the attempted adjustment away from the anchor of one's own experience might be insufficient, especially when strong feelings absorb one. This anchoring effect is robust in adolescence, which leads to a rationalization whereby adolescents feel

transparent to others and, therefore, always scrutinize an imaginary audience. Previous research has demonstrated that adolescents score higher on the imaginary audience's self-report measures than adults (e.g., Rosenroll, 1987). Rai, Mitchell, Kadar & Mackenzie (2014) study the illusion of transparency effect in adolescents and suggest that transparency was positively correlated with tests of private self-consciousness, which measured awareness of inner feelings and thoughts. Being more focused on inner life probably led to the perception that internal life was more apparent to others than the case. Both adolescents and adults have a similar egocentric bias.

Furthermore, adult and adolescent female speakers rated themselves as appearing more nervous than others rated them. Adolescent egocentrism also exists in adults, since when involved in the activity of projecting themselves into another person's mind, both adults and adolescents are prone to similar levels of a specific egocentric bias. Therefore it is not "egocentrism" that is not an attribute of adolescents.



Figure 4.3: Lady Bird being grounded by Marion (Gerwig, *Lady Bird* 2017)

Adolescence is a sensitive period for developing self-concept and its components: behavioral, cognitive, evaluative. Students-adolescents' self-esteem depends on how others perceive it. One of the primary age tasks becomes the search for one's place in the world. Basin, , Fateeva & Khalidov (2019) studied the relationship and interdependence of the level of self-esteem and manifestations of self-centeredness in adolescents and found that deviations in self-esteem development leave an imprint on the severity of adolescents' self-centeredness, leading to inadequate assessment of others, themselves and the difficulties of socialization and integration into society. Therefore, a well-established self-concept is essential for the growth of young people.

In the movie, *Lady Bird* always apologizes to her mom, "I'm sorry that I'm not perfect," which shows that she is not confident enough and needs to rely on her people's evaluation of herself to position her self-concept. *Lady Bird*'s mom does not see her insecurity. Still, she continues to blame her for "expecting everybody to do everything for [her]" and that "[she] doesn't think about anybody else except [herself]" (*Lady Bird*, 2017). Marion does not realize that her child's self-centeredness stems from her inadequate assessment of others, themselves, and the difficulties of integration into society. Rather than criticizing adolescents, parents should help their children establish accurate self-awareness and build self-confidence so that they can evaluate themselves more objectively and the people and things around them, thus getting rid of self-centered thoughts.

Aggression



Figure 4.4: Lady Bird arguing with Marion in the car (Gerwig, *Lady Bird* 2017)

The film portrays Lady Bird as a rebellious adolescent who jumps out of her mom's car when they argue. It is not entirely an exaggeration since disobedient psychology is prevalent among American teenagers. There is growing consensus that individual differences in children's and adolescent's personality traits can be captured by the Big Five personality factors, typically labeled as (a) extraversion, (b) agreeableness (or benevolence in youth), (c) conscientiousness, (d) emotional stability, and (e) openness/imagination (Caspi & Shiner, 2006; Shiner & DeYoung, 2013). The Big Five is structured hierarchically, with the five broad factors, each subsuming several lower order, more narrowly defined facets. Research suggests that dysfunctional parenting is an essential contextual risk factor for developing aggression and rule-breaking behavior (Dishion & Patterson, 2006).

Overactivity is an essential aspect of parenting to examine during the transition from childhood to adolescence. During this phase of life, youth need support from their parents while

they strive for autonomy. Becht, Prinze, Deković, Van den Akker & Shiner (2015) explore how specific personality facets interact with overactive parenting in the development of aggression and rule-breaking behavior. They find that aggression typically shows a decline across the adolescent years, with most children displaying low and decreasing aggression levels. Parental over-reactivity uniquely predicted membership in the high increase and high decreasing aggression groups, relative to the low aggression group, but not group membership for rule-breaking. Therefore, overactive parents may negatively reinforce their children's aggressive tendencies by taking away their demands when children respond to them with hostility.

In all, adolescents' aggressiveness is not inherent but is closely related to their parents' teaching. Parents should tailor parenting to a child's personality characteristics to promote adjustment, and externalizing problems may develop due to a mismatch between child characteristics and the parenting they experience.

Dealing with stress

If childhood is often portrayed as carefree, then the "pronoun" of adolescence is stress. In becoming adults, teenagers are under pressure from society, their parents, and their expectations. Stress is present in the life of every human being. However, people differ in the intensity of their stressors and their responses to them. Individual differences in various psychological characteristics determine these differences in the perception and assessment of stressful situations. Resilience certainly plays the most crucial role, as it enables adaptation to faced adversities and stressful situations. Piekarska (2020) examines the power of personality traits, emotional abilities, trait emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, and self-esteem in predicting perceived stress in adolescents. Results indicate that the most vital determinant of perceived stress in adolescents was high neuroticism. Perceived stress was also determined by low

self-efficacy and self-esteem, as well as high extraversion and psychoticism. Women reported higher perceived stress than men. It shows that the development of high self-esteem and high self-efficacy may contribute to perceptions of lower stress in adolescents and may be especially valuable for neurotic individuals and for women who are more exposed to stress.

The level of self-esteem has significant consequences for functioning and adjustment. Indeed, much research revealed that low self-esteem leads to many problems and difficulties in life (Leary & Baumeister, 2000) and is strongly related to emotional functioning. Self-esteem also influences the perception of interpersonal relationships. Individuals with low self-esteem are more sensitive to negative evaluation, have a higher need for acceptance, and doubt their interpersonal value. In contrast, individuals with high self-esteem believe they are liked and accepted by others and that others will react to their needs (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Positive effects of self-esteem include using more adaptive coping strategies, developing and maintaining satisfying relationships with others, and perceiving social support as available may lead to lower perceived stress in life. Indeed, earlier studies confirmed that adolescents with a high level of self-esteem perceive lower school stress (Guo et al., 2018).

Self-esteem is also a moderate predictor of perceived stress. This result follows earlier studies indicating that high self-esteem is associated with better adjustment and emotional functioning (e.g., Guo et al., 2018; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Steiner et al., 2002). General self-acceptance may lead to the perception of lower stress in life. As individuals with high self-esteem use more adaptive coping strategies (Yildirim et al., 2017) and have more satisfying interpersonal relationships (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), which can be a source of support to make it easier for them to regain balance in stressful situations. Individuals with high self-efficacy appraise stressful situations as challenges (Luszczynska et al., 2005), leading to

lower perceived stress. Therefore, building up the self-confidence of young people can improve their ability to withstand stress, calmly deal with pressure from all parties during this critical period, and achieve healthy psychological growth.



Figure 4.5: Lady Bird's college counselor (Gerwig, *Lady Bird* 2017)

In *Lady Bird* (2017), neither the parents nor the school pays much attention to building young people's self-confidence. For example, when Lady Bird was about to apply for college, her college counselor only pointed out Miss. Bird has low grades and should not apply to top schools instead of encouraging her to try. The college counselor also explained that "my job is to make you realistic", which makes Lady Bird even less confident about herself and feels that his ideas are irrational. They mistake adolescents' egocentrism for arrogance and always suppress the young people's opinions, making them more unclear about themselves and less confident in their judgments. This increases their stress and weakens their ability to resist pressure, which harms young people's growth.

The Roles of Parents

It is generally believed that as adolescents become independent, the relationship between parents and adolescents will deteriorate. However, research has found that a substantial proportion of adolescents remain to perceive a relationship in which they experience parental support and endorse parental authority. Thus, although most adolescents perceived themselves striving for more independence and grew less likely to legitimate parental control, some adolescents perceive themselves as accepting their parents' authority to set rules in some aspects of their lives (Darling et al. 2008).

Individual differences in endorsing parental authority may explain why some adolescents remained in an authoritative relationship, whereas others moved away from it. Hadiwijaya, Klimstra, Vermunt, Branje & Meeus (2017) examine the extent to which the development of adolescents' perceived relationship with their parents is consistent with their perspectives. They found evidence that only some adolescents temporarily perceive distress in their parents' relationship as their relationship evolves from hierarchical into egalitarian. Moreover, the researchers found substantial individual differences indicating that some adolescents do not experience relationship quality development. Their study shed light on the importance of studying individual differences in relationship development across adolescence.

Family connectedness is essential during the transitional phase of adolescence when adolescents demand more independence from their parents and rely more on their peers. Willems, Laceulle & Bartels (2020) suggest that more family connectedness is significantly related to better self-control in adolescence. In other words, the role of family connectedness in adolescent self-control is significant. Parra, Agueda & Alfredo (2009) study the development of emotional autonomy through adolescence, analyzing its association with family relationships.

They found that some dimensions of emotional autonomy increase throughout youth while others decrease, so the global level of emotional autonomy remains stable.

Furthermore, emotional autonomy is associated with negative family relationships, so emotional independence indicates an insecure attachment to parents. In *Lady Bird* (2017), Lady Bird tried her best to leave the family and study in New York from California alone, which may reflect her secure attachment to her parents. Indeed, in the movie, Marion and Lady Bird lack communication, and her father loses his job and suffers from depression. In fact, he does not show it at all and Lady Bird is genuinely surprised to hear from her mother he is depressed. Lady Bird tried her best to leave the family and study in New York from California alone, which may reflect her insecure attachment to her parents. Therefore, when adolescents show extreme emotional autonomy, parents should adequately reflect on whether they have insufficient companionship for their children, which leads to the alienation of family relationships. Suppose early adolescence is the most unstable moment within the family system. In that case, the high emotional autonomy of individual adolescents who are still developing a negotiation process with their parents might answer these troublesome relationships (Collins, 1995). As far as a new balance is attained, adolescents will decrease their emotional autonomy to the average amount.

While communicating with adolescents, parents can use techniques to make the communication more efficient without causing unnecessary emotional waves. Rogers, Howieson, & Neame (2018) assesses two specific aspects of language style that theorists have recommended as beneficial tactics for minimizing hostility during conflict: I-language instead of you-language, and communicating perspective (Hargie, 2011). They suggest that people are more likely to receive a defensive and hostile reaction when they do not convey any attitude, regardless of whether they use I-language or you-language. On the other hand, if we share using

statements that include both the self and the other person's view, and have I-language, then we are less likely to receive a defensive response. Therefore, when communicating with adolescents, parents can pay attention to inserting their perspectives.



Figure 4.6: Lady Bird communicating with Marion (Gerwig, *Lady Bird* 2017)

Ashkenani, Yousefi & Torkan (2018) study the effectiveness of teaching communication with adolescents to their mothers and how emotion regulation to adolescents on reducing stress and depression. The results show that teaching communication with adolescents to mothers and teaching emotion regulation methods to adolescents were effective in reducing adolescents' anxiety and depression during the time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Lady Bird* (2017) tells the growth story of American girls. I analyzed the importance of different psychological constructions to young people from the perspective of emotional growth. I investigated the development of self-compassion, self-concept, self-esteem, and their roles in teenagers' psychological development.

Self-compassion is malleable in adolescents and can be cultivated through teaching mindfulness and self-compassion skills. Developing self-compassion is advantageous in facilitating the emotional challenges adolescents face as they traverse this problematic developmental stage. Adolescence is a sensitive period for the development of self-concept. Studies have found that deviations in self-esteem development leave an imprint on the severity of adolescents' self-centeredness, leading to inadequate assessment of others, themselves and the difficulties of socialization and integration into society. Parents should help their children establish accurate self-awareness and build self-confidence to evaluate themselves more objectively and the people and things around them, thus getting rid of self-centered thoughts.

We all know that teenagers have many troubles, so educators should focus on cultivating their ability to withstand stress so that they can pass this stage more smoothly and become responsible adults. Studies indicate that the most vital determinant of perceived stress in adolescents was high neuroticism. Perceived stress was also determined by low self-efficacy and self-esteem, as well as high extraversion and psychoticism. Individuals with low self-esteem are more sensitive to negative evaluation, have a more increased need for acceptance, and doubt their interpersonal value. In contrast, individuals with high self-esteem believe they are liked and accepted by others and react to their conditions. Therefore, building up the self-confidence of young people can improve their ability to withstand stress, calmly deal with pressure from all parties during this critical period, and achieve healthy psychological growth.

At the same time, adolescence is also linked to "rebellion." Parents should communicate effectively with their children. Family relationships are closer to help young people better understand their inner thoughts, peacefully express themselves, and establish objective

self-awareness. When communicating with adolescents, parents can use some techniques, such as incorporating their perspectives, to make the communication more efficient.

Conclusion

To sum up, adolescents from different cultures all encounter a lot of unavoidable challenges and changes during their growth. Through these adventures, young people gradually form their own worldviews, break away from their egocentrism and unrealistic values, and become strong, confident, and sensible. In this article, I examine some aspects of psychological growth inspired by four typical films that record adolescents' growth. Through research and analysis of the themes of 1) the tensions between conformity and individualism, 2) belonging and outcasting, 3) family inclusion and separation, and 4) reality and fantasy/expectations, I investigate the beneficial effects and disadvantages from both internal (self-concept and emotional development) and external influences (societal, parental, schooling systems, campus environment) on the growth of young people.

Expectations from society, pressure from parents and teachers, and collectivism in the Chinese education system have all affected young people's psychology and decision-making. Since we cannot change China's education system, the college entrance examination is inevitable. However, we can change teachers' and parents' attitudes and educate their children to support their growth better. Verhoeven, Poorthuis & Volman (2019) studied how schools and teachers can support adolescents' identity development and indicated that teachers could organize different types of explorative learning experiences to support adolescents' identity development: affairs aimed at in-breadth exploring new identity positions, further specifying already existing self-understandings and reflecting on self-understandings (Verhoeven et al., 2019).

Meaningful learning experiences make it easier for adolescents to link their already present self-understandings to school's learning contents and activities. The practice may help them identify with the learning content and activities, stimulating them to further explore

whether they want to make specific identity commitments for those contents and activities.

Learning experiences are considered meaningful when adolescents recognize themselves in the learning material and content. Meaningful learning experiences do not have to concern adventures that perfectly suit adolescents. Instead, they are experiences that appeal to adolescents in such a way that they feel motivated to engage in identity exploration.

It is vital to make adolescents feel respected and appreciated to warrant a supportive classroom climate. A supportive social atmosphere may help adolescents to feel safe enough to take these risks and deal with such possible discomfort. To be more specific, teacher compliments and warm teacher-student relationships may contribute to a supportive classroom climate. Teachers should also communicate to their students that they can make mistakes. When teachers share their doubts and make mistakes every once in a while, this may reassure students.

In all, parents are encouraged to work collaboratively with schools to intervene and prevent bullying by increasingly more researchers. Adolescents who have a negative perception of their family environment recognize that they have less ability and resources to face common social problems, of which bullying and cyberbullying are among the most frequent. Parental support is an important environmental factor that affects adolescents' development; many studies have shown that adolescents with parental backing have higher motivation, better academic performance, better levels of life satisfaction, and self-esteem. Parents can also provide autonomy support, which helps their children get valuable information, recognize emotional experience, and feel smaller pressure. Ma & Wang (2019) define autonomy support as a way individuals think of essential others' support for their free choice and independent decision. Parental consent can effectively predict college students' social competence.

School and family are the two micro-social environments that students interacted with in daily life. Therefore parents and schools should work together to improve bullying. Zhang, Han & Bai (2020) point out that family cohesion and school cohesion are protective factors of psychological distress. Individual, peer relationships, family, school, and community factors, are potential protective factors against the involvement of bullying and cyberbullying and their possible social psychological consequences. Many studies have shown that the sense of security students get at home and the importance of belonging they get at school can reduce their likelihood of becoming bullied and increase their chances of reporting bullying. School belonging is an important protective factor, which has a significant and negative direct effect on mental distress. Moreover, researches suggested that the relationship between school belonging and depression was mediated by purpose in life. In other words, emerging adults who attend school could improve their mental health problems by enhancing their sense of school belonging through purpose in life.

Adolescence is a sensitive period for developing self-concept and its components: behavioral, cognitive, evaluative. Students-adolescents' self-esteem depends on how others perceive it. One of the primary age tasks becomes the search for one's place in the world. Basin, Fateeva & Khalidov (2019) studied the relationship and interdependence of the level of self-esteem and manifestations of self-centeredness in adolescents and found that deviations in self-esteem development leave an imprint on the severity of adolescents' self-centeredness, leading to inadequate assessment of others, themselves and the difficulties of socialization and integration into society. Therefore, a well-established self-concept is essential for the growth of young people.

Self-compassion is malleable in adolescents and can be cultivated through teaching mindfulness and self-compassion skills. Developing self-compassion is advantageous in facilitating the emotional challenges adolescents face as they traverse this problematic developmental stage. Adolescence is a sensitive period for the development of self-concept. Studies have found that deviations in self-esteem development leave an imprint on the severity of adolescents' self-centeredness, leading to inadequate assessment of others, themselves and the difficulties of socialization and integration into society. Parents should help their children establish accurate self-awareness and build self-confidence to evaluate themselves more objectively and the people and things around them, thus getting rid of self-centered thoughts.

Educators should focus on cultivating adolescents' ability to withstand stress so that they can pass this stage more smoothly and become responsible adults. Studies indicate that the most vital determinant of perceived stress in adolescents was high neuroticism. Perceived stress was also determined by low self-efficacy and self-esteem, as well as high extraversion and psychoticism. Individuals with low self-esteem are more sensitive to negative evaluation, have a more increased need for acceptance, and doubt their interpersonal value. In contrast, individuals with high self-esteem believe they are liked and accepted by others and react to their conditions. Therefore, building up the self-confidence of young people can improve their ability to withstand stress, calmly deal with pressure from all parties during this critical period, and achieve healthy psychological growth.

Regarding the research results, I enumerate the excellent and insufficient guidance that social policies and family customs have brought to female adolescents' growth and bring up some questions worth thinking about. By comparing and exploring Chinese and Western society, I discover the advantages and shortcomings of educational systems. The research shed light on

the constraints of different cultures on female adolescents. I hope this research can provide information supporting the psychological growth of female adolescents in a more considerate way.

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